



AARON HARRIS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

CFL alumni scoring big in business world

Whether by determination or necessity, Canadian football players are becoming canny businessmen

CHRIS ZELKOVICH
SPORTS REPORTER

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At his first CFL training camp in 2001, he heard players talking about off-season jobs and preparing themselves for their next careers. At the two NFL camps he'd attended, the future was seldom discussed.

"When I was in the NFL, there were a lot of guys who came in with no thought as to what they'd do when they were finished," says the former Toronto Argonaut, who announced his retirement earlier this week. "The next thing you know, they're gone and they've got to reinvent themselves."

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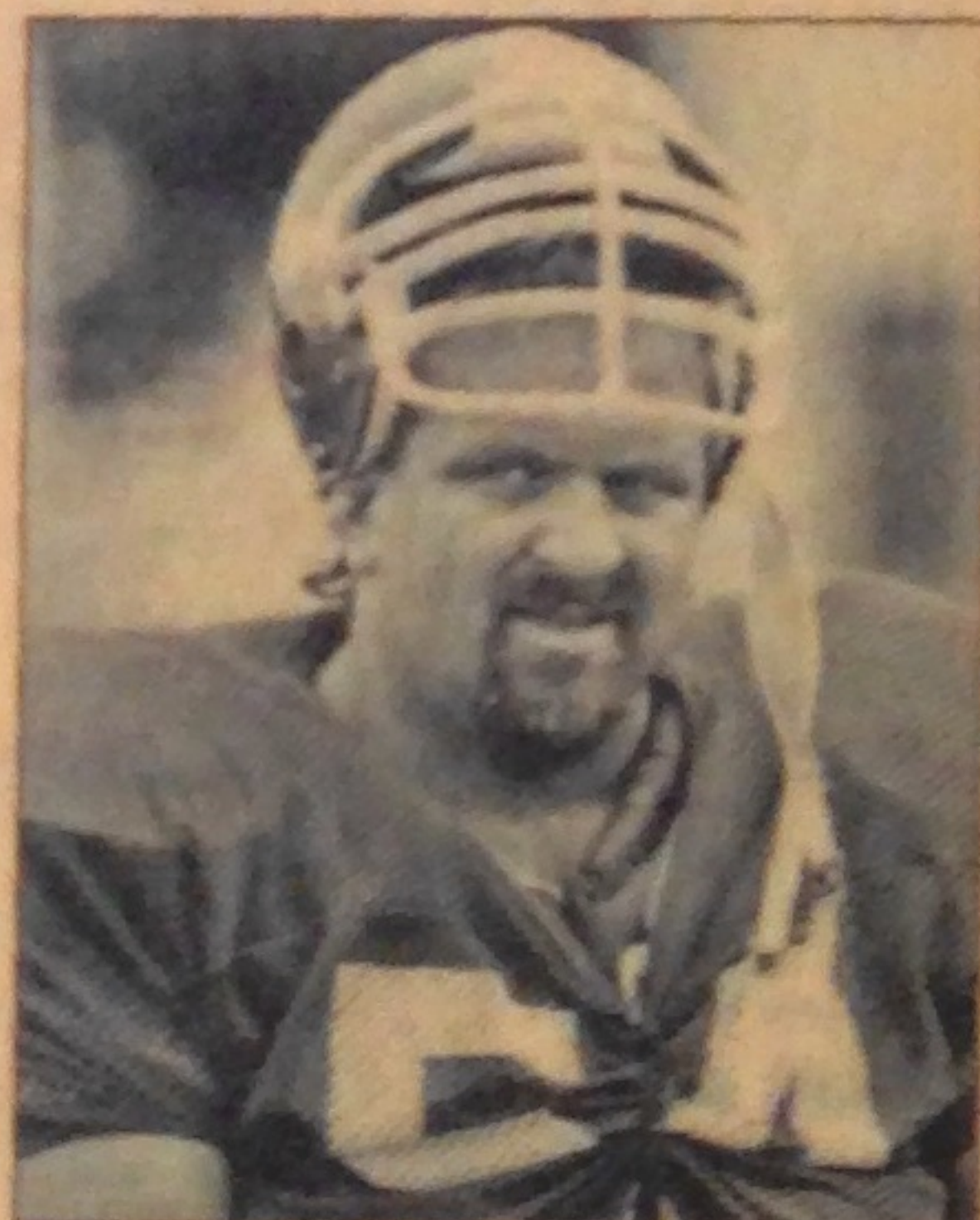
Many have prepared themselves well for that day — and many are doing very, very well.

Belli got ready by working in the family meat business, and now runs a successful operation that employs 60 people. Business is booming so much, he no longer had the time to get himself into playing shape. He's just one of many CFL alumni to become successful businessmen.

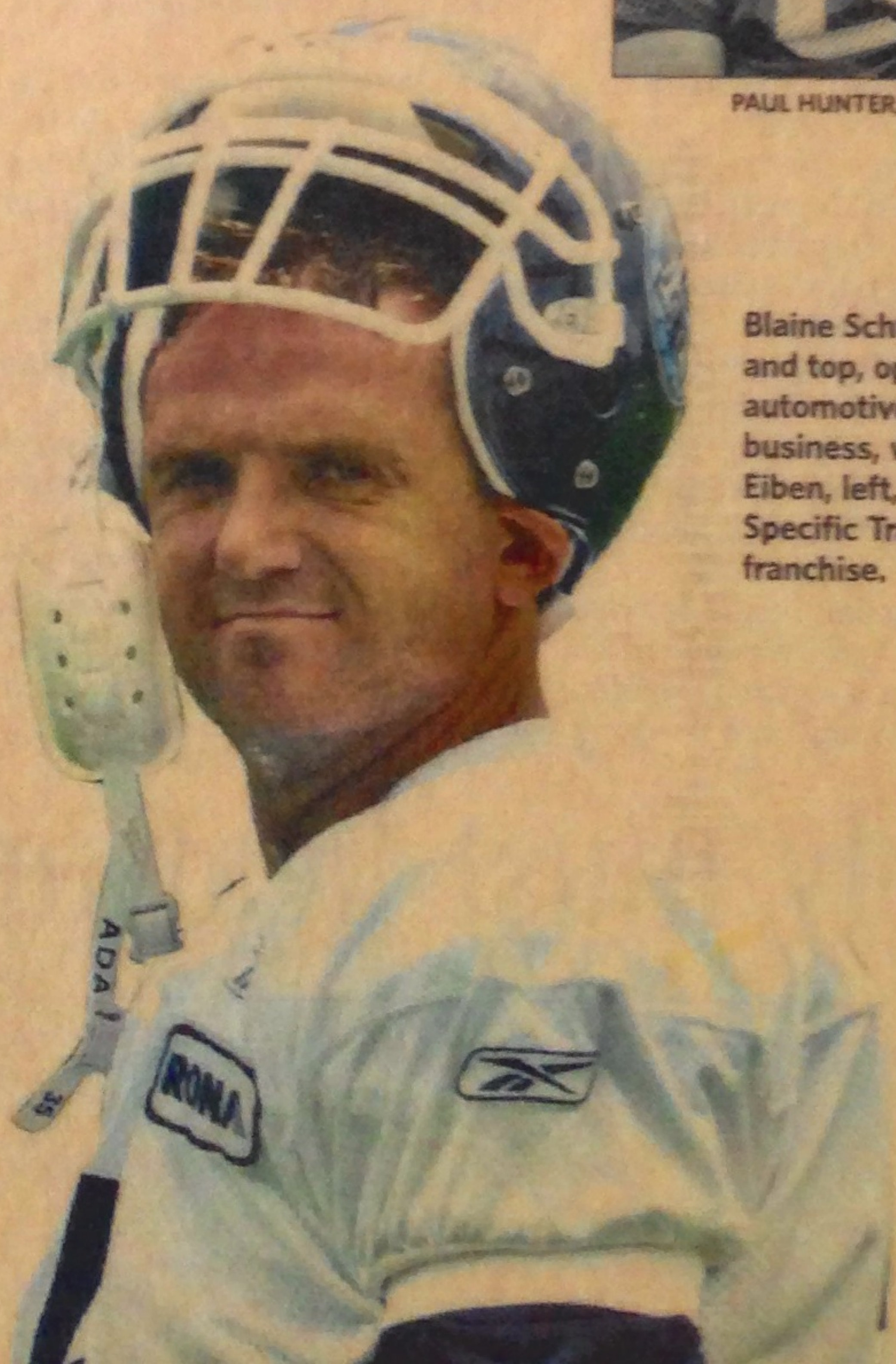
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There's former Hamilton Tiger-Cat defensive lineman David Sauve, the owner of more than 10 Tim Hortons franchises and an investment company. Ex-Argos Blaine Schmidt (wireless and auto reconstruction), Jim Stillwagon (marketing) and Bobby Taylor (Black Bull Pub) are prominent businessmen. Former Calgary Stampeders Dave Sapunjis and Bob Vickers have made a fortune in the oil business.

BUSINESS continued on S6



PAUL HUNTER/STAR FILE PHOTO



Blaine Schmidt, above and top, opened an automotive restoration business, while Kevin Eiben, left, runs a Sports Specific Training franchise.



THE GREAT BLACK/WHITE HOPE

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CFL

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CFLers get set for life off the field

BUSINESS from S1

Former BC Lions lineman Gerald Berger and Ian Sinclair operate a Vancouver travel agency that employs 36.

Part of the reason for the success of former players is necessity.

The CFL's average salary of about \$60,000 would be considered pocket change by most NFL players, who average about \$200,000 (U.S.) a year.

"We make good money for six months' work, but you don't make as much that you can coast," says Eiken. "You have to set up something for after the career's over."

While NFL players ride in the big bucks for a few years — the average career is around four seasons — it's a completely different story once the cheering stops and the pay cheques end.

It's estimated that two years after retirement, more than 70 per cent of former NFL players have either declared bankruptcy or are in financial difficulty. No such figures are available for the CFL, but anecdotally few are suffering.

But necessity isn't the only reason football players succeed in business.

The competitive fire that drives players to push their bodies to the limits and play in pain are perfectly suited to the cutthroat world of business.

"Business is competitive and we're competitive by nature," says Belli, whose Freshness Foods company distributes deli meats and cheeses.

"We know in football that if you don't compete, you don't have a job. It's the same when you're running your own business."

In many ways, the CFL provides the perfect storm for over-sized entrepreneurs to get established. The practice day is only 4½ hours. Travel is minimal and the season is only six months long.

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ADRIANO BELLI
FORMER ARGONAUT

"It's a great way to get into business," says Belli.

"You're off for six months, your day isn't all that long, so you can do things you normally wouldn't be able to do."

"And most coaches are pretty good about accommodating you, too."

Then there's the fact that a significant number of players have good educations, which certainly comes in handy. The league tends to attract players who didn't go to the big American football factories, where education is often an afterthought for those on scholarships.

"A lot of Canadian players went to Canadian universities, so academics came first and athletics came second," says CFL Alumni Association executive director Leo Eschima.

"It prepares them better than a lot of guys who were on full-ride scholarships where grades didn't matter that much."

The CFL also offers players the kind of exposure that opens doors that might remain closed to others. That's particularly true in the West, where CFL players are treated like rock stars.

But even in Toronto, where the Argos tend to get lost in the post-game shuffle, the CFL big carries some cache.

When Schmidt was with the Argos and selling cellphones, he used to head rooms at the old Rhydian hotel and entertain potential customers after games. Teammates would drop in and schmooze with the guests.

"That's where I got a lot of my major clients," says Schmidt, who used the profits from two cellphone outlets to launch his real business, a car restoration business called Best Hill Automotive Restoration in Etobicoke, Ont., two years ago.

"Spending time with Argos was something special for people."